NB *This is a pre-publication version of a book review published in the* Journal of Architecture (2016).

Please reference the published version: https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2016.1233624

Carrying Off the Palaces: John Ruskin's Lost Daguerreotypes
Ken Jacobson and Jenny Jacobson
London, Bernard Quaritch, 2015
ISBN 978-0-9563012-7-7
Hb, £85.00, pp. xxvi, 406 (including 601 illustrations)

This book is the result of a remarkable story. It began with the discovery of a battered wooden box of unknown origin at an auction in Penrith in 2006. Despite a guide price of £80–120, after furious bidding lot 132 was eventually solid for £75,000. The reason being, the box contained 188 daguerreotypes previously owned by John Ruskin (1819–1900). These photographs depicting Italy, France and Switzerland had been 'lost' since the contents of Ruskin's Lake District home, Brantwood, were sold, auctioned and otherwise disposed of or dispersed. The book's preface relays the action of that 2006 auction with the breathless excitement of a would-be client relating a case history to Sherlock Holmes. In a more sober tone, the auction of Ruskin's possessions in 1931 is also recounted (where a similar sounding box and contents changed hands for just six shillings). The rest of the book seeks to contextualise the rediscovered daguerreotypes, ascertaining who made them, where and when, as well as discussing Ruskin's interest in them and the use to which he put them in his writings on nature, art and architecture.

This is a considerable undertaking, as evidenced by the time between the purchase of lot 132 and the book's publication. The result is a substantial and impressive piece of scholarship. The first considerable challenge following the acquisition was conservation. Notoriously fragile, daguerreotypes are one of the earliest forms of photography where a unique image is captured on a silver-plated sheet of copper, this delicate object usually being protected by a sheet of glass and an individual case. Ruskin's daguerreotypes had, for over a century, been stored loose and unprotected. (The wooden box can be seen on the window ledge in a painting of Ruskin's study by W.G. Collingwood from 1881). The photographs thus posed a significant challenge for conservators, Grant Romer and Àngels Arribas. Equally meticulous was the effort to reconstruct the network of commercial photographers that Ruskin

commissioned to produce many images in his collection. Research in more than 20 European cities was complemented by Gabriella Bologna's work on advertisements in local Italian newspapers to determine the businesses and entrepreneurs operating in the 1840s and 1850s. The authors also consider in detail Ruskin's own involvement in producing many of these images alongside his personal assistants (Frederick Crawley and John Hobbs) and commercial photographers (such as the improbably named Fortunato Lasagna and 'Le Cavalier Iller').

The Jacobsons' commitment and passion is palpable as they not only examine each individual daguerreotype, but also meticulously map Ruskin's circle including artists, writers and photographers. Drawing extensively on diaries, letters, lectures and publications, they reconstruct in forensic detail the events, personalities and interactions which gave rise to the creation of his collection. In addition to the ten central chapters of the book, a catalogue raisonné of 325 known Ruskin daguerreotypes details producers, dates, locations and (as well as technical details about the images) references to Ruskin's discussion of their subject matter in his publications. With high productions values, over 600 illustrations and several appendices (including a list of 64 missing daguerreotypes), the resulting study situates the collection in relation to the business history of nineteenth-century photography, Ruskin's own intellectual history, and the collective biography of his circle.

The picture of Ruskin's relationship with photography that emerges is a conflicted one. Ruskin's attitude to photography ebbed and flowed, from his discovery of the medium and his championing of its potential in October 1845, to his criticisms a decade later in *Modern Painters, IV* regarding underexposed shadows and overexposed details. As the authors adumbrate with extensive quotations, Ruskin occupied many positions between these extremes of rapture and rebuke. In 1851, for instance, he lamented that artists did not recreate in their own work 'some of the beautiful effects which the daguerreotype alone can seize' (p.196). While in 1865 he asserted that 'a square inch of man's engraving' is worth more than all photographs together (p.199). These fluid attitudes to the medium perhaps reflect Ruskin's varied experience of using photography in researching and writing his own treatises. Considerable effort and cost was expended by Ruskin in amassing this visual archive on which he seems to have relied heavily in producing some of his key works, like *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1848) and *The Stones of Venice* (1853). Ruskin valued the daguerreotype image in particular for its detail and because, although fragile, it was not subject to the same fading as paper-based photographs. However, his indeterminate position on photography also reflects the fact that, as Lindsay Smith observed, at this point in the medium's history photography was not one thing; there were multiple technologies and techniques vying for

supremacy and valued for different reasons and uses.[1] Like Ruskin's assessment of it, nineteenth-century photography was multifaceted.

Of course, as well as the remarkable story of the 2006 auction and subsequent research, this book concerns a remarkable city indelibly connected with Ruskin's name. By far the most common subject of the daguerreotypes is Venice which Ruskin first visited in 1835. The book's cover image (one of the first photographs Ruskin acquired) is an 1845 daguerreotype of the Ca' d'Oro on the Grand Canal.

Venice – characterised by Robert Hewison as 'a notoriously fictional city' – has been central to the British cultural imagination for centuries.[2] Throughout the 1700s the upper classes embarked on the Grand Tour, taking in the sights of Europe (including the ruins of classical antiquity and the works of the Renaissance) and returning replete with books, artefacts and pictures as evidence of their cultured status. Venice, a salient feature of such early tourism, was at this point an independent republic. It was overthrown by Napoleon in 1797, however and the following year (under the Treaty of Campoformido) the city was subsumed into the Austrian Empire. Napoleonic rule returned to the city from 1806 until 1814, when it passed back to Habsburg domination. A republic was briefly re-established during the failed revolutions of 1848. It was only in 1866 that the city and the Veneto region became part of a unified Italian nation. And not only did geopolitics impact on Venice during the period of Ruskin's visits, so too did industrialisation. Connecting the city with the rest of the Austrian Empire, the railway causeway was opened in 1846.

Thus, when Ruskin returned to the city in 1848 to begin research for *The Stones of Venice*, although he delighted at the destruction that year of the railway causeway, he was concerned about the potential damage to Europe's architectural heritage caused by these turbulent times. Part guidebook, part history, part philosophic treatise, *The Stones of Venice* refracts these and other concerns of the era through the prism of architectural history. In a peculiarly Victorian manner, it melds the ethical and the aesthetic, presenting Venice not only as a place of great architectural beauty, but also as a political and moral lesson for British civilisation. As the seat of a former empire with a formidable navy, Venice enthralled Victorian Britain. It offered a mirror in which citizens of a nation at the height of its success could glimpse both traces of Venetian history and, perhaps, portents of Britain's future.

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[1] Lindsay Smith, *Victorian Photography, Painting and Poetry: The Enigma of Visibility in Ruskin, Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.10.

[2] Robert Hewison, *Ruskin on Venice: 'The Paradise of Cities'* (London: Yale University Press, 2009), p.1.

Unfortunately, the authors never engage fully with the question of what Venice meant to Britons in this charged historical moment. Rather than considering why Venice so captured Ruskin's imagination, for instance, readers are simply told that he was 'never a great lover of Rome' (p.159). In this book, Venice largely remains a backdrop or stage set for Ruskin's photographic project. The image of the city conveyed here has the clarity and order of a Canaletto oil painting, when what is called for is something more akin to the complex atmospherics of a Turner watercolour. In particular, the authors do not reflect in a sufficiently sustained manner on how the new technology of photography shaped ideas about travel, architectural heritage and Venice itself at the time.

Notwithstanding the impressive research and conservation work evident in producing this book, readers with an interest in the cultural history of architecture and of photography may not be fully satisfied. They may be left wanting more critical interpretation of the daguerreotypes themselves, as well as more reflection on the impact of the medium on the discourse and practice of Victorian artists and intellectuals. These daguerreotypes merit subjection to the same forensic scrutiny as the letters, diaries and other historical material examined by the Jacobsons and their collaborators. Instead, the book never goes much further than simply highlighting 'that peculiarly circular way in which photography has always influenced art and art in turn influenced photography' (p.153/5). Too often the authors seem to share this appreciation of the daguerreotypes and their doubtless aesthetic appeal, reiterating rather than interrogating the judgments of Ruskin and his contemporaries regarding their purported realism or beauty.

Although Ruskin's reputation declined in the mid-twentieth century, he was widely read in his own time. There was much to read, his complete works being published in an edition amounting to 39 volumes. What impact can he be judged to have had on Victorian attitudes towards photography? How might photography be understood as shaping his influential writings on art and nature? What exactly did Ruskin and his circle value in these photographic objects described variously at the time as beautiful photographs, exquisite scenes and artistic achievements? Such questions are not answered in sufficient depth by this otherwise highly accomplished book.

One way into this set of historical problems would be to consider the mobility of the photograph. The book's title is taken from a letter Ruskin wrote to his father from Venice on 7 October 1845. He enthused, 'Daguerreotypes taken by this vivid sunlight are glorious things. It is nearly the same as carrying off the palace itself.' Following his discovery, Ruskin was able

to transport detailed images of Venice away with him when he left the city, to commission images of the city when he was absent, and to convey these images to his audience (whether through drawings and prints derived from photographs, or later through photographically-illustrated lectures or publications). Thus, the daguerreotype – for all that Ruskin implied it was a simple documentation of architecture – was a profoundly novel means of representation that radically changed the apprehension of its subject matter. Naturalistic and highly mobile, the image of the building now floated free of its place-specific origins. In what ways did this new communicable architectural imagery influence ideas and attitudes? At the very least, Ruskin's photographically-informed publications contributed to establishing Venice as an essential destination for the new bourgeois traveller of the second half of the nineteenth century – a phenomenon which in turn stimulated a burgeoning trade in photographic souvenirs.

Ruskin's comment on the 'glorious' daguerreotype also highlights another issue demanding exploration, the affective capacity of these photographic objects. The Jacobsons do refer to Ruskin's 'visual passion' (p.211) and rightly point out that 'his obsession with collecting daguerreotypes must be categorised emotionally' (p.202). Yet, the relationship between his emotional attachment to these objects, his considerable investment in collecting them, and his desire to understand the subject matter of these photographs require working through in more detail. How should we understand this hyperactive and acquisitive pursuit of the visual? Far from being unique to Ruskin, this phenomenon was widespread, reflected in the establishment of Architectural Photographic Association in 1857 which the writer addressed two years later.

These questions are not new in the fields of photographic history or photography studies.[3] But while some of that work features in the extensive bibliography, the trace it has left is difficult to discern in this book. The Jacobsons have produced a richly detailed picture, but it is from one perspective only. The topic merits bringing together a collection of different views, much like the contents of the box at the centre of their research. For instance, what might Steve Edwards make of the division of labour at the heart of the production of these images?[4] Ruskin's varied role as commissioner of photographs, director of the photographic process or curator of photographs sourced by others surely says a lot about Victorian photographic culture and questions of class and capital – societal and economic questions

[3] Cf. Karen Burns, 'Topographies of Tourism: "Documentary" Photography and "The Stones of Venice",' Assemblage 32 (1997), 22–44; Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1990).

[4] Steve Edwards, *The Making of English Photography: Allegories* (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2006).

with which Ruskin himself was concerned. And what perspective might Elizabeth Edwards offer on the conception of the past that made these images work for Ruskin and his contemporaries?[5] These daguerreotypes perform a particular historical imagination both in their depiction of Venice, and in their material life as a mobile collection of images that can be relocated, reordered and reviewed.

For over 175 years, photography has been central to British representations and conceptions of Venice. It remains so, one of the fundraising activities of the London-based 'Venice in Peril' initiative being the sale of photographs. So to my mind, the priority should now be to ask how this remarkable case study informs our understanding of the position of photography in nineteenth-century debates about architectural style and architectural heritage. The position of Venice in Ruskin's oeuvre deserves revisiting given the wealth of information and material about his commissioning and collecting of photographs of the city now revealed. Anyone interested in doing so will be very grateful to the Jacobsons and their many collaborators for finding, conserving and illuminating that innocuous wooden box, its contents and the many remarkable stories and questions they pose.

[5] Elizabeth Edwards, *The Camera as Historian: Amateur Photographers and Historical Imagination, 1885–1918* (Durham, NC.: Duke University Press, 2012).